

Beowulf

XXXIV

THE fall of his lord he was fain to requite
in after days; and to Eadgils he proved
friend to the friendless, and forces sent
over the sea to the son of Ohtere,
weapons and warriors: well repaid he
those care-paths cold when the king he slew. [footnote 1]
Thus safe through struggles the son of Ecgtheow
had passed a plenty, through perils dire,
with daring deeds, till this day was come
that doomed him now with the dragon to strive.

With comrades eleven the lord of Geats
swollen in rage went seeking the dragon.
He had heard whence all the harm arose
and the killing of clansmen; that cup of price
on the lap of the lord had been laid by the finder.
In the throng was this one thirteenth man,
starter of all the strife and ill,
care-laden captive; cringing thence
forced and reluctant, he led them on
till he came in ken of that cavern-hall,
the barrow delved near billowy surges,
flood of ocean. Within 'twas full
of wire-gold and jewels; a jealous warden,
warrior trusty, the treasures held,
lurked in his lair. Not light the task
of entrance for any of earth-born men!

Sat on the headland the hero king,
spake words of hail to his hearth-companions,
gold-friend of Geats. All gloomy his soul,
wavering, death-bound. Wyrð full nigh
stood ready to greet the gray-haired man,
to seize his soul-hoard, sunder apart
life and body. Not long would be
the warrior's spirit enwound with flesh.

Beowulf spake, the bairn of Ecgtheow:--
"Through store of struggles I strove in youth,
mighty feuds; I mind them all.
I was seven years old when the sovran of rings,
friend-of-his-folk, from my father took me,
had me, and held me, Hrethel the king,

with food and fee, faithful in kinship.
 Ne'er, while I lived there, he loathlier found me,
 bairn in the burg, than his birthright sons,
 Herebeald and Haethcyn and Hygelac mine.
 For the eldest of these, by unmeet chance,
 by kinsman's deed, was the death-bed strewn,
 when Haethcyn killed him with horny bow,
 his own dear liege laid low with an arrow,
 missed the mark and his mate shot down,
 one brother the other, with bloody shaft.
 A feeless fight, [footnote 2] and a fearful sin,
 horror to Hrethel; yet, hard as it was,
 unavenged must the atheling die!
 Too awful it is for an aged man
 to bide and bear, that his bairn so young
 rides on the gallows. A rime he makes,
 sorrow-song for his son there hanging
 as rapture of ravens; no rescue now
 can come from the old, disabled man!
 Still is he minded, as morning breaks,
 of the heir gone elsewhere; [footnote 3] another he hopes not
 he will bide to see his burg within
 as ward for his wealth, now the one has found
 doom of death that the deed incurred.
 Forlorn he looks on the lodge of his son,
 wine-hall waste and wind-swept chambers
 reft of revel. The rider sleepeth,
 the hero, far-hidden; [footnote 4] no harp resounds,
 in the courts no wassail, as once was heard.

Footnotes.

1.

That is, Beowulf supports Eadgils against Onela, who is slain by Eadgils in revenge for the "care-paths" of exile into which Onela forced him.

2.

That is, the king could claim no wergild, or man-price, from one son for the killing of the other.

3.

Usual euphemism for death.

4.

Sc. in the grave.